UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/C.2/48/7
10 November 1993
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: FRENCH/ARABIC

Forty-eighth session
SECOND COMMITTEE
Agenda item 96

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Letter dated 3 November 1993 from the Permanent Representative of Tunisia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit to you herewith the text of the Tunis Plan of Action on Population and Development in the Arab Maghreb, adopted by the Maghreb Conference on Population and Development held at Tunis from 7 to 10 July 1993.

I should be grateful if you would have this letter and its annex circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 96, of the Preparatory Committee for the International Conference on Population and Development and of the Conference itself.

(Signed) Slaheddine ABDELLAH
Ambassador
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Annex

Tunis Plan of Action on Population and Development in the Arab Maghreb, adopted by the Maghreb Conference on Population and Development held at Tunis from 7 to 10 July 1993

INTRODUCTION

The Maghreb Conference on Population and Development was held at Tunis from 7 to 10 July 1993 in the context of the preparations for the International Conference on Population and Development to be held in Cairo in 1994.

The participants in the Conference convey their deep gratitude to the Republic of Tunisia for the facilities provided to ensure the success of the meeting and for its kind hospitality and to the United Nations Population Fund for its valuable support to population activities in the Maghreb countries.

The countries of the Maghreb are today facing a number of challenges that must be met if their own objectives are to be achieved and if progress is to be made in strengthening the Maghreb in general in all fields.

Demographic growth is one of these challenges and will remain so for at least two or three decades to come. The continued development of the Maghreb countries will necessarily require the preparation and implementation of population programmes in parallel with policies for economic restructuring, the alleviation of poverty and the elimination of regional disparities. It will also require the elaboration of integrated programmes in the fields of health, education, training, environmental protection and housing so that sustainable development can be assured.

Despite the progress made in addressing population issues at the Maghreb level and the policies and programmes that have been drawn up and the institutional measures taken, birth rates, maternal and infant mortality rates and the incidence of disease remain generally high and vary widely from one country to another. The achievements made in family planning must therefore be consolidated and a new and well directed impetus imparted to them.

In general, and given the close links and common destiny that unite the Maghreb countries, greater attention must be accorded to population issues because of their impact on each country and on the Maghreb as a whole.

The population of the Maghreb is currently approaching 70 million, and it is expected to reach 82 million by the year 2000, 100 million by 2010 and 130 million by 2025. Current rates of population growth in the Maghreb countries are regarded as high in relation to world-wide rates (2.7 per cent a year as against 1.6 per cent).

Birth rates are also high. While the world birth rate is in the order of 29 per thousand, it is 46 per thousand in Mauritania, 43 per thousand in Libya, 30 per thousand in Algeria, 27 per thousand in Morocco and 25 per thousand in Tunisia. Some Maghreb countries have succeeded in lowering their birth rates by

pursuing a population policy, and this has made it possible to relieve demographic pressure in a number of development fields and particularly in education, health, employment, housing and transport. Demographic pressure nevertheless remains a matter of concern for all the Maghreb countries, and the under-15 age group represents 38 per cent of the population in Tunisia and Morocco, 44 per cent in Algeria and Mauritania and 45 per cent in Libya. This indicates the youthful character of the population structure together with the consequent social and economic needs in various fields.

Control of birth rates has become a pressing need with the success encountered by the Maghreb countries in reducing mortality rates through improved standards of hygiene and medical services.

The International Conference on Population and Development to be held in Cairo in September 1994 will provide an opportunity for a thorough examination of population and development issues and of their bearing on the environment and cultural and social factors. The countries of the Arab Maghreb Union therefore participated in the conferences held at Dakar from 7 to 12 December 1992 and at Amman from 4 to 8 April 1993 and endorsed the declarations adopted by them.

The Tunis Conference provides a new opportunity for our countries to consolidate the consensus already reached by them while highlighting the special character of their own region and its common problems.

On the basis of the foregoing, the representatives of the Maghreb governments adopt the following Plan of Action.

I. BASIC PRINCIPLES

The Plan is based on the following set of principles:

That issues relating to population and development are of crucial importance, as affirmed by numerous international forums and conferences;

That issues relating to population and development in the Maghreb countries have a certain similarity, and that these issues include the problems of sustainable development, internal and external migration, the role of women in development, human rights, all forms of extremism and its adverse impact on the development of societies, and the role of non-governmental organizations in promoting development efforts;

That concrete expression should be given to the close links between the policies pursued by the various Maghreb countries in these fields and their impact on the Maghreb countries as a whole, that their complementarity should be reinforced, and that they should implement joint programmes and exchange experience in the population and development fields;

That the Maghreb countries have an individual and collective responsibility to preserve a balance between population and development;

That the advancement of man is the chief objective of the development process;

That there is a need to protect the environment and maintain the balance between population and the environment;

That women have an important role in society as a basic factor in economic and social development;

That the family occupies a distinctive place in Maghreb society;

And that it is essential to improve the living conditions of Maghreb children and to ensure their right to a happy life.

II. OBJECTIVES

In the light of the foregoing basic principles and with a view to achieving a balance between population and development, the Tunis Conference establishes the following objectives:

1. To review and examine major common issues and future challenges relating to population and development;

2. To conduct an exchange of views and hold consultations on a series of issues relating to population and development and to establish common positions thereon for submission to the Preparatory Committee for the International Conference on Population and Development to be held in Cairo in September 1994;

3. To establish priorities and strategies for the Maghreb in order to meet the challenges encountered by each of the Maghreb countries in the population field by developing complementary population programmes and activities;

4. To formulate basic principles for the coordination of population policies in the Maghreb countries and for their implementation and follow-up;

5. To elaborate joint plans of action and programmes to strengthen scientific and technical cooperation between the Maghreb countries in the population field and to upgrade national technical personnel by joint training and the improvement of qualifications;

6. To establish permanent coordination mechanisms on population issues to assist in the formulation of joint positions and programmes of work for the Maghreb countries, particularly in the field of family planning;

7. To endeavour to standardize the concepts and terminology used in this field and ensure their adoption;

8. To regard population issues as one of the chief components of the economic and social development models used, and to give concrete expression to this by developing appropriate legislative and institutional mechanisms and formulating adequate plans for execution;

9. To encourage non-governmental organizations and the private sector to play an active and complementary role in achieving population goals and to participate in the implementation of the relevant policies;

10. To augment information, education and communication programmes in the population field in order to alert Maghreb public opinion to the importance of the issue and endeavour to disseminate a true understanding of religion as it relates to the spacing of births and the role of women and the family in society, given the positive impact of such factors on security and health in general;

11. To consolidate the achievements of the Maghreb countries in the field of family planning, and to provide all appropriate means of ensuring the necessary activities and services for women beneficiaries, particularly in village communities and remote localities.

In view of the urgency of the demographic problem and its manifold effects at the national and regional levels, and given the need to address population issues in the framework of an approach that envisages regional integration in the long term, it is proposed that the following points be studied by the Maghreb countries:

1. Integration of population policies in the sustainable development process

The population issue must be assigned a major place in the conceptualization of the sustainable development process, and population policies must first be adopted to improve the standards of living of the population and ensure its welfare with all that that involves in terms of a better distribution of resources and greater access to education and health services and in terms of employment, housing, culture and leisure.

Some of the Maghreb countries have adopted measures with a view to regulating demographic growth, directly or indirectly. Family planning policy should not, however, be restricted to limiting such growth but should be integrated within a more global approach with the chief objective of ensuring the stability and protection of the family.

2. An approach to population issues in the light of the interdependence and complementarity of the Maghreb countries

The countries of the Arab Maghreb Union must strengthen their cooperation in all issues in this field. They must, in particular, formulate training programmes, initiate exchanges of experts, establish research programmes focusing on their common goals in the population field, launch joint information campaigns and programmes, promote the economic and social role of women and encourage non-governmental organizations to participate in the formulation and implementation of population programmes.

With a view to establishing a framework for integrated action in the near future, the basic principles and broad outlines of joint action on population issues and in the training of human resources and scientific and technical personnel must henceforth be laid down.

Further, the Maghreb countries must give thought to the establishment of regional programmes and projects that will enable them to benefit from international assistance earmarked for this purpose. The Maghreb countries must

each give assiduous attention to the population issue, and the Arab Maghreb Union must also accord the field the attention that it merits.

3. International migration

The issue of international migration is currently being accorded particular attention because of its special place in population policies.

The presence of large numbers of Maghreb migrants abroad, particularly in Europe, presents difficult problems for both countries of origin and receiving countries that need to be solved fairly and humanely. The rights of migrant workers and their families must be protected in accordance with the relevant international covenants and bilateral agreements, and a Maghreb-European framework must be established to guarantee those rights.

There is also a pressing need to improve the situation of the Maghreb migrant community, particularly in Europe, and to strive to bring an end to the marginalization of migrant women in the host countries and to obviate its impact on the personality development of their children and on their participation in everyday life. The Maghreb countries and the countries of the European Community must therefore establish specific strategies to assist migrants, and particularly women, in the fields of education, training and employment.

4. Population movements among the Maghreb countries

Because of their proximity to each other and their cultural similarities, the Maghreb countries have experienced cross-border population movements for several hundred years. Now, it is more than ever necessary that they should manage such movements in the context of the future development of the Maghreb as a whole.

Thus, the Maghreb countries should organize their internal labour markets by establishing supply and demand statistics and should exchange information in this field with a view to strengthening intra-Maghreb cooperation, particularly in fields of technical specialization, before soliciting cooperation at the international level. Similarly, the Maghreb governments must simplify procedures for the travel and residence of nationals of the region for purposes of work and accord them the rights enjoyed by the citizens of each individual country in such matters as social security, retirement pensions, family allowances, etc.

5. Internal migration and regional development

Rapid urbanization and the large-scale development of cities constitute a tangible fact for the next decade of development in the Maghreb countries. Although the hopes and the changes that urban development brings with it should not be overlooked, the problems to which it may give rise in the fields of employment, manpower mobilization, the food balance and environmental protection must not be ignored.

Issues of internal migration, regional development and urbanization have a special place in the development plans of the Maghreb countries, and

considerable efforts have been made to reduce interregional disparities, curb the exodus from the countryside and control urban growth.

It has therefore become necessary to have precise statistical data, broken down by geographical area and category, in order to highlight the local variations to be taken into account in the formulation of effective programmes.

In the coming decade, the Maghreb governments must redouble their efforts to pursue a policy to combat poverty and urban overpopulation. In doing so, they must accord a proper place to urban policy and must encourage the creation of medium- and small-size towns that can ensure improved economic and social conditions for their inhabitants. In rural areas, the various sectors centred on farming should be developed.

In this connection, the strengthening of cooperation among the Maghreb countries through the exchange of experience in the formulation of integrated urban and rural development strategies can bring about a harmonization of views on urban policies and can ensure the coordinated development of all the countries of the region.

6. The status of women, women's rights and the role of women in development

The improvement of the health of mothers and children and of the family in general is to a large extent linked with anticipated developments with respect to the status of women. It has been established that the status of women in society determines reproductive behaviour and affects the success of family planning programmes. The advancement of women through access to education, training, employment and health services and their enjoyment of full rights, their ownership of property and their free disposal of income have an unquestionable impact on family size and the spacing of births and thus on the advancement and welfare of the family as the basic unit in social development.

The Maghreb countries must promote the role of women in development and grant them the right to exercise informed choice in the matter of birth control with unimpeded access to the necessary means.

This right must be exercised through the elaboration of concrete programmes for the establishment of an adequate number of family planning centres, easy access for women to contraceptives and the formulation of an educational and cultural programme to encourage women and men to choose responsible reproductive behaviour and stimulate the awareness of young people with a view to preventing such undesirable phenomena as child neglect, illegal and unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted diseases, etc.

7. Elaboration of joint health programmes

Priority must be given to maternal health and to the reduction of child mortality in the framework of population programmes to be integrated with primary health-care services. It is to be noted, moreover, that it is the deterioration in standards of living and living conditions in certain impoverished areas that underlies the re-emergence of diseases that had been on the decline, such as tuberculosis, and the outbreak of certain epidemics. The region is also experiencing the emergence of new diseases, including acquired

immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). Efforts must therefore be made to formulate a common health strategy to combat these diseases by adopting a policy that includes prevention, the dissemination of information and treatment.

In view of the close relationship between health and population issues and in light of the efforts being made to ensure health for all by the year 2000, the Maghreb countries must strive:

(a) To promote the inclusion of population factors in preventive and therapeutic health strategies and programmes while attending to the improvement of nutritional levels for children and mothers;

(b) To bolster maternal and child health services and particularly safe motherhood programmes;

(c) To ensure that married couples are better informed, as a part of health education to be emphasized, particularly in primary health-care centres, so that they may use family planning methods;

(d) To promote and disseminate research into maternal and child health in all Maghreb countries and to carry through the Arab Maternal and Child Health Care Programme.

8. Political and cultural aspects of population issues

Given the established fact that respect for human rights and democracy are basic constituent elements of development, the Maghreb countries have established policies recognizing fundamental freedoms and the importance of the principles of tolerance, solidarity and openness.

The principles shared by the Maghreb countries represent a sufficient basis to enable them to reach a unified position with respect to all forms of extremism and the adverse consequences they can have for reproductive behaviour and for fertility levels.

Accordingly, in the formulation of population policies an endeavour must be made to establish a true understanding of religion as it relates to population issues in general and to the spacing of births in particular. Efforts must thus be made to develop a new demographic culture and encourage the emergence of particular behaviour patterns in connection with reproduction through the establishment of information, guidance and training programmes.

9. Towards sustained international assistance

It is now clear that any sustainable economic growth necessarily leads to a decline in demographic growth. Donor countries and institutions must therefore continue to cooperate with the Maghreb countries in the funding of population policies. It would be unfortunate if opportunities for the Maghreb countries to obtain such assistance were curtailed at the time they need them most.

The continued imbalance between North and South assuredly will not serve the interests of the European Community. Financial and technological support to the Maghreb countries, on the other hand, will make it possible to transform the

Mediterranean region into a common economic sphere with the chief objective of creating a new focus based on mutual development and gradual economic and social integration.

The United Nations Population Fund, which has continued to provide assistance to the Maghreb countries in support of their population policies and programmes, is urged to strengthen its commitment and increase its assistance in order to consolidate the achievements made. All countries, and particularly donor countries, are therefore urged to increase their contributions to the Fund in order to meet the increasing needs of population programmes.

10. Increased efforts for the use of debt service for the benefit of development

For the Maghreb countries, debt repayment represents a burden on their economies and a drain on the financial resources they badly need to fund and consolidate economic growth. United Nations studies have shown that in third world countries debt repayment is most often effected to the detriment of expenditure on human resources development and the advancement of such social sectors as education, training, health, etc.

The Maghreb countries propose that debt service should be used for the benefit of population policies and programmes, and they stress the linkage between problems of indebtedness and development and population issues and the need to step up efforts to achieve fairer terms of trade in general.

11. Population and environment

Another portion of the debts can be allocated to the funding of environmental protection projects. The Maghreb countries are undergoing strong demographic pressures, difficult economic circumstances and, in most cases, adverse climatic conditions. All of these factors exacerbate the overexploitation of natural resources and prevent adequate control of pollution, desertification, deforestation and soil erosion.

Any population policy must accord attention to the interaction of population, environment and development, and concern for environmental protection must be a factor in any model for economic and social development and a basis for ongoing cooperation both at the Maghreb and Mediterranean levels.

12. The role of non-governmental organizations

The Conference recommends that the Maghreb governments should accord greater attention to the role of non-governmental organizations in the population field and in the development field in general. In this context, measures should be taken with a view to expanding the participation of local and regional groupings in the planning, implementation and funding of health and family planning programmes with the goal of encouraging non-governmental organizations involved in demographic studies, women's issues and development to incorporate the population dimension in their activities and of strengthening relations between States and non-governmental organizations.

13. Increased scientific and technical cooperation in the population field

Over the past two decades, the Maghreb countries have acquired tangible experience in demography and considerable capacities in the information field which would achieve more effective results within a cooperative framework.

In the scientific and technical field, the Conference therefore recommends as follows:

1. The know-how acquired in the population field should be made generally available and the significant stock of technical knowledge accumulated in the region over the past two decades should be put to use through the exchange of experience, joint experiments and the acquisition of technical and scientific knowledge for use in the service of development.

2. Joint research programmes should be established in the demographic field for the purpose of identifying current population trends and characteristics.

3. The population training courses to be developed at the Maghreb level should be identified, given that cooperation in this field requires the exchange of instructors and the coordination of training programmes. In this connection, the Conference welcomes the establishment of a training centre in the field of population and development.

4. Priorities for the Maghreb in population research activities should be identified in order to enable governments to make the appropriate decisions in the formulation of a balanced and coordinated programme of action.

5. The documentation centres of each country should be strengthened so as to integrate all publications on social and cultural issues, particularly those relating to young people and women, and to carry out studies in this field.

6. An integrated system should be established for population censuses, information relating to civil status and household surveys, and the endeavour should be made to standardize the methodology used in order to facilitate the coordination of population policies and strategies in the Maghreb countries.

7. National agencies responsible for the collection of demographic data and for population projections should be strengthened and prospective studies improved.

8. Country networks for population data should be linked together with a view to facilitating the exchange of information.

9. Training in the demographic field and the movement of personnel between Maghreb countries and institutions should be encouraged.

10. Integrated programmes should be formulated for the purchase, manufacture and distribution of contraceptives in order to reduce the cost of population programmes.